

TRANSFORMING THE HOLOCAUST INTO AN
ADVENTURE IN VIDEOTESTIMONY: AN UNEXPECTED
FORM OF DISCOURSE¹

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1. TRANSGRESSING RHETORICAL CONVENTIONS

Analysis of Holocaust discourse, whether oral testimony, personal memoir or works of literature, has been dominated by what Mintz (2001)² calls the *exceptionalist* model of interpretation. According to this model the Holocaust occurred so far beyond what was imaginable, that is, it was so exceptional, that survivors found no existing representational form to adequately capture their experiences, hence the title of the influential book edited by Friedländer (1992) *Beyond the Limits of Representation*. At its most extreme the *exceptionalist* model suggests that silence is the only possible response to Holocaust trauma (Trezise, 2001 and Gigliotti, 2003)³. If survivors do speak, their language lies outside narrative, their discourse is disjointed, reflecting the fragmented sense of self that leaves many permanently disoriented. Typically, however, *exceptionalist* analysis restricts itself to the extremes of camp life “*emblematically Auschwitz*” and disregards Holocaust experiences outside camp settings (Reiter, 2000). As the examination of a sub-set of Holocaust videotestimonies demonstrates, Holocaust experiences were not restricted to camp settings and an analysis that excludes such experiences is necessarily incomplete. Not only do respondents’ testimonies follow a conventional narrative structure, but they also conform to the unlikely narrative genre of adventure. Significantly, such accounts deviate from *exceptionalist* discourse in both narrative construction

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² Mintz (2001) contrasts the *exceptionalist* model to the *constructivist* model, which privileges the interpretation of Holocaust experience within the context of Jewish cultural tradition.

³ Gigliotti (2003) refers to the wider debate on the representability of genocide.

and content⁴. The videotestimonies to be discussed here are selected from a collection of over fourteen hundred given by Holocaust survivors living in Melbourne, Australia. The impetus for the testimonies project came from the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre (JHMRC), established by survivors in the mid-1980s. Interviews are conducted by volunteers, many, but not all of whom are survivors. While interviewers receive some training and have sought advice from relevant scholars, they are not themselves academics interviewing within a preconceived analytical framework⁵.

The JHMRC collection operates in the first instance as a conventional oral/video history collection and shares the general features of other such projects as outlined by Schiffrin (2003). This repository of the experiences of members of the survivor group enables them to *validate* their experience through acknowledgement from an external agency. In addition, the collection constitutes a rich storehouse of data for historians interested in the relationship between private recounting of life stories and public themes in historical discourse. A further strength of the collection is that, in line with the original traditions of oral history (Portelli, 1998), it captures the experiences of *ordinary* individuals whose lives were touched by the Holocaust⁶.

Oral/video histories framed by the Holocaust are imbued with additional features that transcend, or even run counter to, the historical, and some of these features are evident in the JHMRC collection (Schiff *et alii*, 2001)⁷. They perform a commemorative, indeed *reverential* function, in relation to Holocaust victims, whose suffering must not be forgotten. Further the recounting of traumatic stories is believed to be therapeutic and to help survivors overcome the effects of trauma (Rose, 1999) although the efficacy of this approach is challenged by writers such as Lawrence Langer (1991), who suggests that the psychological integration of survivors is unachievable (see also Felman & Laub, 1994). A tension is evident between the essentially historical, referential orientation of oral history in general, whose purpose is the reconstruction of the past through personal narrative (Chamberlain & Thompson, 1996), and the particular nature of Holocaust testimony, which is

⁴ For other examples of Holocaust narratives that refuse to follow the script see Schiff *et alii* (2001). In this account, the respondent Mike refuses to represent Germans in general as anti-Semitic.

⁵ By contrast see, for instance, the history of Yale Fortunoff Oral History Project (*Yale Fortunoff*). Refer also to Rothberg & Stark (2003).

⁶ Portelli (1998) discusses at length the role played by oral history in the development of *bottom-up* historical discourse by capturing the experiences of ordinary people.

⁷ The therapeutic theme is perhaps less evident here, although the interviewer's background can influence the perceived purpose of the interview.

framed by extra-historical concerns such as commemoration and resolving trauma. The *exceptionalist* perspective accommodates the latter approach, but not the former. Other methodological issues that affect the collection of oral and/or video history, but are less relevant to the central concern here with how adventure is constructed as part of the Holocaust narrative that emerge in videotestimonies, include the reliability of memory and the role of the interviewer in shaping memory (Langfield & Maclean, 2002; Tonkin, 1992; Chamberlain & Thompson, 1996, and Mishler, 1986).

A further tension is evident between oral histories with a coherent narrative form and incoherent histories that conform to the exceptionalist perspective. Portelli (1998) argues that the listener should be aware that oral history discourse displays narratological features, especially in its use of thematic genres that influence how events are remembered and recounted. His approach mirrors Bruner's (1991: 15) characterisation of genres as "ways of telling that predispose us to use our minds and sensibilities in particular ways". Thus Portelli (1998: 26) observes: "(a)t the core of the narrative created by the classic oral history interview and by the classic oral history text (...) we find motifs and themes that insist on the relationship between the individual and the public". According to Portelli, male *war* stories and female *hospital* stories are narrative genres that have continually resurfaced in the oral histories that he has collected. The generic conventions used in oral history narratives enable speaker and audience to share common understandings (Chamberlain & Thompson, 1996). Norman Fairclough's (2003) general comment that genres play a pivotal role mediating between text and society (see also Bakhtin, 1986) reinforces observations about the intermediary function of genres specifically in oral history.

Conventional oral history accounts may frequently be meandering in nature, none the less, they retain a strongly narrative form and follow a coherent story structure. Lakoff (2003: 139) suggests coherence and cohesion in personal narratives is indicative of psychological wellbeing and a capacity to come to terms with trauma. By contrast, she argues, traumatised individuals mobilise strategies that avoid acknowledging their experiences and "remake the narrative in distorted form". If, in accordance with the *exceptionalist* model, *distorted narrative* and incoherence characterise Holocaust discourse (Rose, 1999), what is the significance of a Holocaust discourse that appears to fit most readily within a conventional narrative framework?

The article addresses this question by focusing on what I term adventure videotestimonies –personal accounts of the Holocaust in which the respondents recount their experiences within the narrative convention of

the adventure⁸. Such stories are presented in an animated fashion, their tellers emphasising elements of suspense and excitement.

The adventure videos differ in three significant respects from *normal* Holocaust narratives:

a) Temporally ordered

They recount *incredible* experiences both within a temporally ordered event structure (Sternberg, 1990)⁹ and within a framework that explicitly refers back to the broader historical context (Labov, 1981 & Bruner, 1991). Despite difficult subject matter, cohesive narratives are created from a sequence of episodes, which themselves are coherent in character (van Dijk, 1981). Importantly such narratives *contain* the incredible –the *uncanny* (Bruner, 1991) whereas in the *exceptionalist* discourse the incredible overflows, seemingly beyond structuring, existing outside of narrative time.

b) Highly developed sense of agency

Unlike many Holocaust narratives where survivors comment on an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, interviewees whose Holocaust experiences are presented as adventures often display a highly developed sense of agency. Indeed, Bruner (1991) observes that “some measure of agency” that presupposes the possibility of freedom of choice is integral to narrative, an idea apparently shared by Joseph (1996) (to whom I will return later) who interpolates the phrase “what to do?” into his story at critical moments before proceeding to the next phase of his narrative. The adventure genre privileges action and when told within the medium of video, it becomes a powerful mechanism for engaging the viewer in the flow of events¹⁰.

Not surprisingly, the videotestimonies discussed here are predominantly stories of escape or resistance that negate the notion of the passive Holocaust victim by situating at the centre of action a hero-like figure who is able both to overcome adversity and experiences an unusual degree of freedom of movement (Bal, 1997). To varying degrees, these heroes demonstrate “the capacity to endeavour, risk and win through: for the prevailing of human purpose in the given world” (Dawson, 1994: 55).

⁸ Chamberlain & Leydesdorff (2004: 231) comment on the role played by genres in shaping oral history accounts, as: “Memories refer to and reflect the imaginative structures of the the social mind”.

⁹ Sternberg (1990) criticises mainstream narrative theorists for downplaying the significance of chronological structure in narrative.

¹⁰ Fairclough (2003) comments that discursal genres can be hierarchically ordered in terms of their purposes and levels of activity. Adventure genres are oriented above all to action.

Rose (1999) observes that the traumatised yearn for refuge and safety, in contrast to those who seek out emotional stimulation and adventure. Many of the adventures described in the videotestimonies involve breaking Nazi-imposed constraints. Often, therefore, adventures take place while respondents are travelling and/or attempting to escape, confirming Dawson's observation that adventures take place in exotic settings, offering excitement and escape into other worlds.

Also looming large in the adventure videotestimonies are descriptions of *helper* figures that, as if by magic, intervene on behalf of the interviewees in a manner reminiscent of Propp's account of the narratological conventions displayed by pre-modern adventure stories (Dawson, 1994). Importantly, the sample's interviewees show sufficient presence of mind to take advantage of external interventions.

Those whose Holocaust experiences are recounted as adventure discourses insulate themselves from the effects of horror by psychologically distancing themselves from what for others might be deeply traumatic. At the point at which trauma penetrates their accounts, their stories switch to more conventional Holocaust discursive forms (cf. Leydesdorff *et alii*, 1999).

c) Strongly performative in character

The telling of these stories is strongly performative in character, in a way that reinforces a sense of adventure. Stories are enacted as much as told and the video medium provides a multi-dimensional vehicle for communication, not only by word, but also through gesture, facial expression and voice (Tonkin, 1992)¹¹. Little prompting is needed from the interviewer who can become almost superfluous to the process. Far from being overwhelmed by silence, the interviewees find themselves swamped by words. Indeed, interviewees may find themselves so drawn into the telling of the story that they participate in the telling (see Text 3. Joseph).

2. ADVENTURE AS REVEALED IN VIDEOTESTIMONIES

Three types of adventure videotestimonies are examined, two in detail. The first type is exemplified by recollections of childhood *adventures* as told by two respondents who experienced late childhood/early adolescence as German-Jewish refugees in Belgium. Although recounted decades after the events, their stories clearly retain a child's perspective. The second type of adventure is apparent in the exploits of a Polish Jew, who was in his early twenties during the German occupation and his story, like the previous two,

¹¹ Tonkin (1992) highlights the use of oral narrative techniques in pre-literate societies.

is recounted from the perspective of his maturational development in that period, but in this case a young man's sexual desire drives his narrative. Finally, to exemplify the third type of testimony I briefly discuss two videotestimonies that incorporate features of both adventure and *exceptionalist* discourse. In the first, the respondent's account oscillates between blank despair and high moments of adventure, as he describes the hopelessness of incarceration in a Polish ghetto, subjection to forced labour, dashed hopes of escape and participation in partisan activities. In the final video (the only one that recalls imprisonment in Auschwitz) the respondent's mode of telling abruptly changes from coherent engagement to disjointed confusion, as her account shifts from describing resistance activities in Germany and Czechoslovakia to life in Auschwitz.

2.1. *Henri and Sonia: childhood adventures in the context of war and of caring*

Henri (2002) and Sonia (1994) were both born in Germany in 1929 and fled to Belgium following the Nazi *Kristallnacht* attacks¹². While Henri came from an assimilated family, Sonia's family adhered to traditional Jewish practices. Both vividly describe their experiences, but from distinctive points of view. Childhood storytelling, family relationships and gender are analytical perspectives of particular relevance to the interpretation of their discourse.

2.1.1. Henri's war stories

Three typical incidents exemplify Henri's account of his adventures. First he describes how in 1939 he and his sister were smuggled out of Germany to join their father who had already escaped to Belgium. Covered by a tarpaulin, they and other children were driven to the Belgian border, which they crossed at night over rough terrain. Henri and his sister were reunited with their father and then joined by their mother. They lived in relative safety in Brussels until the German invasion in May/June 1940 and the commencement of the second adventure when the family unsuccessfully attempted to escape to England. Following the failure of the escape, Henri found himself wandering with his family through northern France, where he

¹² During *Kristallnacht* (Crystal Night) on 9-10 November 1938, Jewish synagogues and businesses were destroyed by Nazis in Germany and Austria in a co-ordinated series of attacks throughout the German Reich. Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps, their release conditional on being able to produce evidence that they could leave Germany immediately. Following *Kristallnacht* many German Jews finally were forced to acknowledge they had no future in the Reich.

witnessed the allied forces' retreat. After describing the shooting down of a German aeroplane in a *real dog fight* during the British retreat to Dunkirk, Henri (2002) comments, "this was the most exciting thing I had ever seen". Improbably, a German army officer helped the family to return to the relative safety of Brussels, although he guessed they were Jewish. Once deportations began Henri was hidden in an orphanage in the countryside and converted to Catholicism. While in hiding in Belgium he became involved in a local resistance cell, which supplied valuable information to the allied forces, partly on the basis of his careful observations. These resistance experiences provided the background for Henri's third adventure.

Forty-seven years after the end of the war, Henri still radiates a young adolescent boy's fascination with war as he relives his experiences. Indeed, he explicitly refers to sections of his testimony as *war stories*. While in hiding in 1944 he watched another German aeroplane being shot down, recounted as Text 1.

TEXT 1. *Henri's transcript*¹³

"I could see the planes um flying over. These were fighter planes, flying over, shooting, and the bullets would of course be shot away.



The cartridges would be ejected from the plane, that is, the brass part, and I could see there was—



¹³ Transcripts are conventionally punctuated. This facilitates ease of reading, especially for reported speech, and reflects that the analysis is not concerned with prosody.



walking towards the toilet, the little, the outhouse—they were sort of falling alongside me and those uh

I looked up the planes was ...



I saw a pilot. In fact they were so uh so low, just clipping, it seemed to be clipping the top of the trees and then diving on top of the train.

We heard the shooting, errh machine gun shooting. I didn't see what happened, because it was too wooded, but I could see smoke rise".

Henri's face radiates animation, even in the still shots. Hand gestures reinforce the story. He stamps his feet to imitate the sound of footsteps as he describes how he walked to the toilet¹⁴.

His fascination with aeroplanes and war stories reflects a strong sense of masculine identification (Dawson, 1994) and, in conformity with Portelli's (1998) observations on genre and gender in oral history, Henri's *war stories* situate his personal narrative within a wider historical discourse—he is extraordinarily articulate, sustaining the narrative for up to half an hour without interruption (the videotestimony extends over nine and a half hours).

¹⁴ The publication of Henri's memoir (Kom, 2004) highlights the difference between the medium of video and written narrative. While the book recounts identical events, it is unable to project the same energy levels as in the videotestimony and is one-dimensional by comparison.

Secondly, despite the fluency of his language, Henri recounts events from an adolescent's perspective, transporting himself and his listeners back in time. Comments on his father's *uselessness* are made in the tone of a resentful adolescent who feels excluded from events. He reluctantly speculates about his mother's relationship with an influential Belgian, the helping figure of the story, who assisted the family to hide and was therefore responsible for their survival.

2.1.2. Sonia's adventures of caring

Whereas Henri's actions appear to have been motivated by personal curiosity and a desire to contribute directly to the defeat of the Germans, Sonia's (Sonia, 1994) behaviour is motivated by her caring attitude towards others and appears to reflect a strong sense of femininity, evident from an early age. Several of Sonia's adventures revolve around the care of her younger brother, made necessary by her mother's frequent illnesses with asthma that was aggravated by the stressfulness of their situation¹⁵. Unlike Henri, who is closest to his mother, Sonia identifies strongly with her father. Sonia recounts five adventure episodes.

In the first adventure (see Text 2) ten year-old Sonia, unaccompanied by an adult, and with no papers, takes her toddler brother by train from Germany to safety in Belgium three months before the outbreak of war in 1939. A year and a half later, as the Germans invaded western Europe, Sonia again found herself alone on a train with her young brother. Rather than taking the children to the coast where an escape via a boat had been arranged, the train was diverted to southern France. There, with the support of a refugee allowance, Sonia looked after her brother for several months until they were located by the Red Cross and returned to their parents in occupied Belgium. Sonia remembers this period with affection. Far from being frightened, she experienced an unprecedented sense of freedom and autonomy, remembering with delight how she collected chestnuts in the forest, bartering them in the village for other foodstuffs.

Sonia's final three adventures took place back in Belgium. By 1942 her family had relocated from the comparatively anti-Semitic city of Antwerp, where it had first settled, to the more sympathetic environment of Brussels. Before going into hiding in a convent Sonia made one last trip to her school in Antwerp in 1942 to collect her report, and this is when she experienced the her third adventure. At the Antwerp station on the way back to Brussels a

¹⁵ Tec (2003) comments on both the issue of men disintegrating under the stress of their changed circumstances under Nazi persecution and also on the continuity of women's caring roles under similar pressure.

Belgian police officer prevented her from getting on the express train to Brussels and, despite her objections, threw her onto the slower train. As her train left, she saw the Gestapo raiding the express train and seizing Jews. Without the policeman's intervention Sonia, who was wearing the Star of David on her coat, would have had no chance.

Although now in hiding in the convent, Sonia was none the less allowed to make monthly visits to her brother who was hidden in a monastery. During one of her visits her brother confided that he wanted to become a priest. Sonia was distraught and undertook a dangerous trip to visit her parents in Brussels, where they too were in hiding, to tell them. Consequently her father took his son out of the monastery and escaped with him to Switzerland. Her father preferred to undertake the dangerous journey than see his son lost to Judaism. Sonia recounts how she again had a lucky escape, as she returned from her parents to the security of the convent. Clutching a piece of jewellery given to her by her father, Sonia stood on the outside step of an overcrowded tram, when the jewellery dropped out of her hand. In order to retrieve it, Sonia jumped off the tram onto the footpath. She watched as the tram moved forward a few metres before –like the train in the previous episode– the Nazis boarded and Sonia again miraculously escaped seizure. A considerate pedestrian returned her jewellery.

Sonia's final adventure took place in the convent, which the German occupiers raided late in the war. The nuns secreted Sonia in a dumbwaiter between floors and for the last time she evaded capture.

Although reliant to various degrees on external *helpers*, Sonia seized the opportunities offered, took risks and kept her wits about her. Resonating through her account is the feeling of control, no matter how extraordinary the event –a classic example of the containment of the extraordinary. This does not mean that her family was not touched by tragedy. Her father and older brother almost died when in 1941 they were incarcerated in a Belgian concentration camp¹⁶.

The following excerpt is taken from Sonia's first adventure episode when she accompanied her brother during their illegal train journey to Belgium. It illustrates her remarkable capacity to improvise at an early age. Even as a child she exploited her femininity to fool the Nazi ticket inspector, deploying her sexual wiles in what, according to Dawson, is one of the few techniques available to female heroines who are not oriented to physical action (1994).

¹⁶ This should not, however, be confused with the transit camps, where Jews were collected prior to deportation for extermination.

TEXT 2. Sonia's transcript

"And then he said, 'Who do these children belong to?'"

And nobody owned up.

And then there was an elderly lady, who must have realised something is fishy, who said up 'they're only children, let them sleep'.

Aaah, 'No, no, no. They must have papers! – *Papiere, Papiere!*'

And then of course I felt his hand on my shoulders and he was shaking me awake and I took as long as I could to wake up and I said to him aaaah, 'Yes please'.



And I was a very polite little girl. I used to always courtesy and said 'please' and 'thank you'. So I said, 'Yes please'.



And he said to me, '*Papiere! Papiere!*'

And I said, 'Do you...?' I said to him mmm, 'What paper do you want?' You know, '*Papiere! Papiere! Was für Papiere?*'

So he said to me '*Dokumente! Dokumente!*'

So I said, '*Was ist Dokumente?*'

So he said to me, '*Passport. Hast du ein Pass?*'

So I said, 'Of course I have a passport. My mummy told me if I didn't have a passport I couldn't go to see my grandmother in Brussels and my mummy bought me a new dress to have a photo taken to go on a passport and my brother had a new suit to go for the photo for his passport'. And I made a long conversation out of it.



So he said, 'Where is that passport with that pretty photo in it? I would like to see it?'

'My mummy said if I lose that passport we couldn't go to Brussels. So my mummy put it in my handbag'

'Alright, where is your handbag?'



'Ohh, my mummy locked my handbag in my suitcase so I wouldn't lose my handbag'.

'And where is your suitcase?'

By this stage he was getting upset.

And I said, 'This nice gentleman next to me put it up there'.

By the time he started looking for the suitcase there was this whistle going.

And he said something along the lines like, '*Verdamme Kinder*', and he walked out and this was it.



And as soon as the train started moving I looked out the window. I remember this man and he wore a longish coat but he was not in uniform and he spoke to a man in a leather coat who must have been Gestapo and he talked to him and the other man went like this (taps head) and he screamed at him, but the train was moving".

Sonia may be quieter in manner than Henri, but she is, none the less, fully immersed in her account, re-enacting, rather than just telling the story and laughing readily at the absurdity of the situation. She slips in and out of direct speech and, while in comparison with Henri her approach is more reflective, she literally speaks with a child's *voice*. Her voice is pitched highest when she takes the child's part in the conversation.

Even now Sonia appears relatively untouched by the impact of the Holocaust. Maybe this is because, like Henri, her parents withheld information to protect her from their deeper concerns. What upsets her most

is the memory of her father's death after the war during the voyage to Australia and within sight of the family's destination in Melbourne.

2.2. Joseph's sexual adventures take him to the heart of darkness

In Joseph's story the urge to survive is inextricably intertwined with the sexual desire of a man in his early twenties. Joseph lived in the southwestern Polish town of Czestochowa. From a well-to-do background he had access to money to ease his situation after incarceration in the ghetto in 1940. During the German occupation he deliberately learnt a skilled trade to enhance his chance of getting work. He was thus able to escape the worst vicissitudes of forced manual labour and remained relatively healthy. His status as essential labour, his good physical condition and luck meant that he avoided deportation to Treblinka. None the less, by 1943 he realised that deportation was inevitable and was determined to escape the ghetto, which he did, helped by a contact in the resistance and his non-Jewish Polish friend, Stefan.

Joseph's adventures are all framed by his personal relationships, with his friend Stefan and with Steffi –the married woman of over forty, who, together with her wealthy husband and her daughter, the Nazis forcibly relocated to Joseph's family home¹⁷. These adventures fall into three periods. First, Joseph describes how he periodically escaped from the sealed ghetto to visit Steffi. Together with her daughter, Steffi had managed to escape registration as a Jew and continued to live on the *Aryan* side. Her husband was not as resourceful and ended up in the ghetto. Second, when Joseph believed that he was no longer safe because of the commencement of deportations to extermination camps, he arranged to escape to Warsaw with Steffi, her daughter and Stefan. The attempt failed and was followed by a complicated escape back to Czestochowa that involved bribery and subterfuge. Third, Joseph decided that the safest plan was in the lion's den, Germany. He substituted himself for a non-Jew and was sent to Wittenberg in Germany as a voluntary, Polish worker. There he was joined by his mistress, her daughter and Stefan whose transfers were arranged with the help of the German labour administrator whom Stefan seduced.

Joseph's account is rather convoluted, however, Text 3, in which he tells the story of Stefan's mistress and how she became an unlikely guardian angel, captures the flavour of his discourse.

¹⁷ Steffi and her family were all Jewish.

TEXT 3. *Joseph's transcript*

“His [Stefan's] mother was living opposite Gestapo headquarters [omitted text referring to previous material] and they put on a quarter a German woman there– the Germans put there (...) The Germans put a German woman who was the director of *Arbeitsamt* of the employment office, German office. Her name was Hilda Janovsky. She was also from Silesia but she practically did not speak any Polish. Janovsky it must be –”

Interviewer: “Polish”

“Yes, Germanised Poles. And she was a big shot you know. Very big office and Nazi Party and so on.

She was in her forties. Very ugly. And I don't know how it happened but it did happen. Stefan seduced her or she seduced Stefan and they were sleeping together. For that she would have finished in a concentration camp and Stefan would be hanged if it had come out. But she was sexually dependent on him.

Stefan did not love her anything like that but he was using her because it came very, very handy later on. Already it came handy here and so the first opportunity –and she had to do. Later she wanted to get out of it because it was too dangerous but she could not because Stefan blackmailed her and he had proofs. He had pictures of her naked. He had letters.”

Interviewer: ... “that she wrote to him”.

“Yes. And he kept them. And a few times she said, ‘I'm going to denounce you’.

He said, ‘Alright, do it. We'll both go you know’ ”.



Joseph seems to enjoy telling his story. He takes the interviewer into his confidence, even laughing with her at some of the ridiculous elements in his narrative. In developmental terms, it is clear that in contrast to the childlike adventures described above, what is being shared are the experiences of a sexually masculinised, independent adult with considerable insight into the motives behind his actions, then and now. In Joseph's case heterosexual sex, rather than war stories, defines his masculinity. Possibly this accounts for the narrative style of the excerpt, which is primarily told in the third person and develops a sub-plot relating to Stefan that highlights once again the pivotal role of *helpers*, in this case, not only facilitating Joseph's survival, but also enabling him to sustain his romantic adventures.

Of course, the background to Joseph's videotestimony was the ongoing persecution of Polish Jews –the murderous violence committed against them, the deprivations caused by forced labour, and deportations. While he mentions these events, Joseph does not dwell on them. Remarkably, he passes over the deportation of his parents in a sentence. Overall he focuses on the romantic adventures he shared with Stefan, Steffi and her daughter. At the end of his testimony Joseph agrees with the interviewer that his story is like a movie plot.

2.3. Marian and Thea: hybrid accounts of adventure and trauma

A brief discussion of two videotestimonies that are best described as generically hybrid illustrates the contrast between testimonies conforming to the *exceptionalist* model and those told within the generic framework of adventure.

Marian (1994), whose home town in western Poland was Oswiecim, renamed *Auschwitz* under Nazi occupation, tells (indeed reads) most of his account in an almost expressionless monotone. He makes little effort to shape his videotestimony into a dialogical discourse and for most of the time seems impervious to emotion, barely responding to the interviewer. He was conscripted as a skilled worker during the reconstruction of the Auschwitz barracks into a concentration camp, where he claims he saw Himmler¹⁸. In November 1943, after four years of ghetto life, forced labour and witnessing numerous atrocities, including his parents' deportation, he managed to escape to the forest and joined the partisans. At this point his discourse is transformed into an adventure story. He looks at the camera and energetically describes his participation in the partisan resistance to the Nazis. With the partisans in the forest Marian regained control and autonomy, commenting

¹⁸ The Auschwitz barracks were previously occupied by the Polish army.

that he was always the first “to do things”. For example, he recounts with delight how he stripped the uniform from a captured German officer and used it as a disguise that even allowed him to enter a German police station.

Thea’s videotestimony (1993) takes the reverse direction. A Jewish-Czech resistance fighter, Thea refers to her activities in the German and Czech underground quite explicitly as *adventures*. She describes in detail how, while living in Germany, she smuggled refugees over the border to Czechoslovakia. Once she came under suspicion Thea moved to Czechoslovakia where she resumed her resistance involvement. Part of her mission involved mixing socially with Germans in the Gestapo and she comments that as an attractive young woman she had, “Quite a few admirers which were Germans”. Her tone changes completely when she moves to her life following her capture. First she was arrested on political grounds and sent to the fortress in Theresienstadt (the town in which, coincidentally, *privileged* Jews from throughout the Reich were imprisoned in a ghetto). Thea was subjected to dreadful torture in Theresienstadt, where she was held for months, but on political not *racial* grounds, until the Nazis discovered that she was Jewish and sent her to Auschwitz. Confusion and incoherence characterise the recounting of her subsequent Auschwitz experiences. Not only does she have trouble assembling her memories of this period into an orderly narrative, she is convinced that no one could comprehend Auschwitz. To emphasise her disorientation she comments, “there were days in Auschwitz when you couldn’t see a little bit of sky”. None the less, she continued her resistance activities in Auschwitz and she tells a story that for her exemplifies the impossibility of making any sense of what occurred there. She was given the responsibility of deciding who should be sent to the camp hospital and had to choose between a young woman and an older woman who both urgently needed treatment –a choiceless choice that placed her in the invidious position of emulating the infamous Nazi selection process because the woman she excluded was destined to die. In Auschwitz the adventure was over and this is reflected in the structure of the discourse.

3. CONCLUSION

This article suggests an approach to the analysis of Holocaust discourse that can contribute to new understandings of the complexity both of the way in which the Holocaust was experienced and of the way in which it has been subsequently told. By presenting their testimonies through the improbable discourse of adventure, a few Holocaust survivors present an alternative to the *exceptionalist* discursive norm. Escape, near misses, magical interventions by unexpected *helpers* and resistance constitute the stuff of

stories set outside the deadly environment of labour and extermination camps. Away from camps, most notably Auschwitz, other experiential possibilities emerge that place far greater emphasis on individual autonomy and action. Although atypical, they cannot be ignored.

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